

KING OF A THOUSAND ELEPHANTS

Drawings by
Wladyslaw T. Benda

BY MICHAEL WHITE

OLD STEAM SHOVEL, the big elephant, was in trouble again. Be it understood, Ramchandgowry (Gowry for short) was his real name; but Warren had bestowed on him the honorable title of Old Steam Shovel in recognition of the way in which he handled a tough job. He could lift or drag a greater weight than any two ordinary elephants; that is, when he felt in the humor for work. But he was prone to balk at certain tasks, particularly when linked up with another elephant. At least that was the repeated complaint of his keeper. In general he gave Old Steam Shovel a pretty bad character. From casual observation Warren was not so sure that the fault was untraceable to an incompetent mahout. In either case, Old Steam Shovel was now up on a really serious charge.

Warren sat on a camp chair as judge of the court. By way of locality, in the rear, jungle-covered foothills climbed to a range of lofty mountains; in front, the tents of a contractor's settlement overlooked certain works that went to prove that Warren was holding to the standard of an American engineer in building a railroad through that difficult region. The prisoner, heavily shackled to two female guards, had been halted a few paces before Warren's position. Nearby stood the elephant executioner, significantly swinging a massive chain, as a police officer might his nightstick. A crowd of mahouts, servants, and coolies was gathered to present more or less veracious testimony. Bheem Gill, a native foreman, in the role of prosecuting attorney, opened the proceedings by salaaming respectfully to the court.

"Sir," began Bheem Gill, addressing Warren and referring to the prisoner, "this elephant is the cause of great trouble to your people. As the Presence has been informed, he frequently refuses to work, and treats with rebellious scorn the orders of his mahout. This morning he threatened that trustworthy man with much sorrow, by casting him on the ground and attempting to put his foot on him. Therefore we have brought this evildoer before your Honor for punishment."

Warren looked at the prisoner with the expression of one adverse to passing judgment on a favorite. In build and physical proportions Old Steam Shovel would have delighted the eye of the severest elephant critic. His massive head and chest, with tusks curving upward and outward, his great, broad back sloping down from shoulders to the tail, his proportionately short colossal legs, thick trunk, and full intelligent eyes, were points proclaiming him a Koomeriah, or high caste elephant, a beast of tremendous strength. At the moment he hung his head a bit dejectedly as if conscious of disgrace and a natural disinclination to struggle with his female guards for freedom. But when Danga the executioner

—a lanky, narrow backed, pig-eyed Meerga, or low caste beast—shook his weapon of chains, Old Steam Shovel turned on him a gaze from which the other might have gathered a lifetime warning.

"The mahout is here to swear to the truth," went on Bheem Gill, "and there are others who witnessed this elephant's wicked conduct. We now wait the Sahib's word to begin the punishment."

Warren was plainly inclined to withhold it. With the brim of his sun hat tilted over his eyes for shade, he listened to the mahout's version of the attack, amply corroborated by willing friends. But to Warren's mind there were some weak points in the case. First, the prisoner could not speak in his own defense. Secondly, and chiefly, Warren had never detected viciousness in Old Steam Shovel's nature. In fact, quite the reverse; for when he petted and fed the huge beast on sugar cane Old Steam Shovel's trunk curled round Warren's shoulders in a friendly and affectionate manner.

As he thought over the charge, it occurred to him that behind, underneath, somewhere in that impenetrable maze of native mind working, there might lie a strong motive for making Old Steam Shovel appear in the worst possible light. Warren had bought the big tusker a few weeks before from three men, who stated they were Cabuli elephant merchants, and represented a financially embarrassed raja in the transaction. But he recalled having seen them hanging around the camp subsequently. To him it now seemed not at all unlikely that if Old Steam Shovel were ordered sold as a useless, vicious brute, the three men would be on hand to purchase him back at a bargain, the foreman, mahout, and friends standing in together. The suspicion prompted him to put a sharp question to Bheem Gill.

"Where are those three dealers from whom I purchased Gowry?"

"Oh, Sir, how do I know?" replied Bheem Gill. "Doubtless they went away to a far country."

"To that jungle temple three miles up the nullah," Warren nodded pointedly. "I caught sight of you smoking with them there the day before yesterday. Call that a far country?"



Bheem Gill vigorously protested that the Sahib must have been mistaken. "That temple is inhabited by a yogi," he explained. "Therefore, it is frequented by many spirits and half shades, things that seem to be what they are not."

"Well, there was no half shade about you," asserted Warren. "And your three acquaintances looked to me as if they didn't lack a pinch of saffron in real curry."

Bheem Gill's absurdly attempted deception in the temple incident tended to confirm Warren's suspicion of underhand work, relative to the principal matter. He was about to order judgment suspended on the prisoner, pending further investigation of the case, when he noticed a subengineer passing at a little distance. As Warren wished to speak with the subengineer privately, he rose and hurried after him, intending to return presently. But to the native mind, as a silent rising from the judgment seat may be construed to mean conviction of the offender, Bheem Gill seized upon it to order the prisoner's castigation. Apart from any other consideration, he was enraged with the beast for making him look foolish before a Sahib. The two female guards were drawn aside to the extremity of their shackles, and the mahout on the neck of the executioner goaded his beast to advance. Swinging the chain above his head, the executioner brought it down with a jangling crash across Old Steam Shovel's shoulders. A shiver ran through the prisoner's huge frame, with a quivering of his immense muscles. A sound resembling a groan came from under his contorted trunk. The crash and groan reached Warren's ears, prompting him to swing round on his heels. On seeing the trunk of the executioner lifted for another blow, he dashed for the scene, shouting anathema and orders to desist.

"Stop that—stop it!" he thundered. "If that chain falls again, I'll do some hard threshing myself!"

He came up to Old Steam Shovel out of breath, risking his reported viciousness by caressing his trunk. But Old Steam Shovel's eyes were fixed on the executioner. If the look bore any significance, it was that the thing which had taken place was to be remembered, and charged to someone's account. It so remained while Warren ordered the shackles unfastened, and it followed the executioner as he was led away still swinging his chain. Explanations that Warren's act of rising from his chair had been misunderstood, that everyone was mistaken in the elephant's character but Warren, that nowhere could be discovered a more virtuous animal, merely convinced Warren that a plan had been hatched for his favorite's undoing, most likely to someone's financial advantage. So he ordered Old Steam Shovel picketed near his tent, and gave him in charge of another mahout.

"I'll use him myself," he decided. "I've got to have a heavyweight to force passages up through the jungle. Guess Old Steam Shovel will make a pretty strong mount."

THUS out of his misfortune Old Steam Shovel benefited by becoming Warren's private elephant. He was no longer compelled to lift and haul heavy construction material, but with solemn, stately pace bore Warren on tours of inspection. Also throughout that territory the change seemed to add greatly to Warren's prestige. In passing through villages the headmen now came out of their thatch-roof huts and stood salaaming deferentially, while nude, fat, dark-skinned little urchins ran beside his progress, holding up their hands and crying lustily:

"May gold and jewels rain upon the king's elephant! A pice! A pice from the Lord Raja Sahib!"

Meanwhile any further native design on Old Steam Shovel seemed to have subsided. Warren heard no more complaints of his behavior, and the representatives of the bankrupt raja had apparently disappeared. Therefore he let the matter drop from his mind, particularly as a more important personal one came up.

The Lieutenant Governor of the province and party came up to witness the capture of a herd of wild



"Lie Low!" He Shouted. "The Beast Has Got Out of Control!"

elephants, protected in an adjacent state reserve. He pitched his camp near Warren's headquarters, and as he was in need of extra tame elephants Warren's good will was sought. On his side Warren was glad to render all the assistance in his power, particularly when he discovered a certain Ethel Preston in the Governor's party. Miss Preston was the daughter of an English officer married to an American woman, hence the strain of mutual ideas was a good foundation on which to build the structure of friendship. Thus, while preparations went forward for the elephant drive, Warren contrived to see much of Miss Preston. As the Governor remarked one day at tiffin, it was a curious fact that she should have become so absorbingly interested in Warren's effort to find the bottom of a quicksand by driving piles into the bed of a nullah. When this was advancing, the herd of wild elephants was definitely located in a valley ten miles distant. A small army of trained men was then despatched to surround the herd with a bamboo stockade some miles in circumference, and with a runway leading into a securely constructed pound. Its being thus reported that the herd could not escape, before daybreak was fixed for the departure of the driving party. At the Governor's dinner on the evening previous, Warren engaged Miss Preston to ride with him on Ramchandgowry (otherwise Old Steam Shovel), asserting for his favorite the greatest care and sagacity. Before entering his tent he patted the great beast's trunk, promising sugarcane in abundance if he carried Miss Preston through the drive without misadventure.

That night sleep for all was light and taken in snatches; for the mahouts endlessly debated the morrow's prospect, and the camp followers kept up a continual racket. The first dawn was still below the eastern horizon, when Warren came forth to superintend the harnessing of Old Steam Shovel. But he was not at his post. In his place was the lanky executioner elephant, Danga. There was a great deal of confusion, every native seemingly bent on getting things into a muddle. Warren's personal servants were not to be found; so for information he had to fall back on Danga's mahout.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "Where is my elephant Gowry?"

Danga's mahout protested he did not know, but thought Gowry had been requisitioned for use by the Governor Sahib. Someone had taken Gowry away, and left an order for Danga to be substituted. He vowed by all his gods he could not see clearly the face of the man who gave the order, but believed he was a White Sahib. If not a White Sahib, then the Governor's *jemadar* (native officer). If not the *jemadar*, then someone else. How could he be expected to see in the darkness? He was a poor man. His father and mother were truthful people. Was not his grandfather elephant keeper to the Raja of—

Warren knew better than to waste more time trying to investigate Danga's mahout. He hastened over to the Governor's camp, to find that the party had already started, leaving Miss Preston behind to be brought on by him. Therefore he was compelled to make the best of Danga, fitted with a saddle. He apologized to Miss Preston as he assisted her to mount.

"I'm told the Governor commanded our elephant Old Steam Shovel," he explained. "It's a use of executive power I hardly expected of him."

"Oh, I'm sure he didn't," Miss Preston settled herself on Danga's back, "because I heard him say the beast he was riding was a remarkably small elephant."

"Queer!" mused Warren. "Looks like a conspiracy somewhere. I wonder what on earth has become of Old Steam Shovel? He's rather large to be appropriated like a watch."

BUT, as it was useless to make probably vain guesses, he climbed to his seat on Danga's back. The mahout pricked Danga with his goad, and the beast started off at a swinging gait. His ungainly build was an advantage over the high caste Koomeriah in one respect, and that only. His length of limb enabled him to stride over the ground at a faster pace. So Warren hoped they would catch up with the party before the scene of the drive was reached. On entering the jungle they could hear the chanting of the mahouts ahead, propitiating the animal spirits that dwelt in those parts; but apparently silence was shortly enforced. Then for a space only the crunching of dry leaves underfoot could be heard, with the swish of twigs on Danga's shoulders and flanks.

For awhile Warren and Miss Preston talked in an undertone, as if rather awed by the enveloping atmosphere of jungle mystery. Then silence fell upon them, as their gaze became fixed on the indistinct outlines of slowly passing objects. In the blackness on each side of the narrow winding lane of half light, sprinkled above by brilliant stars, what might not lay concealed? Now and then a flying fox, or some other winged creature,

flapped down the path in a zigzag course. A jackal howled dismally in the distance; otherwise only the crunching of the dry leaves.

Presently Danga began to display signs of nervousness. He refused the middle of the way, and drew to one side, jeopardizing his riders at the risk of overhanging boughs. After the action had been repeated two or three times, he stopped suddenly and gave vent to a peculiar rattling sound by emitting compressed air from his trunk. Simultaneously Warren thought he heard a rustle in the jungle edge on the side the elephant avoided. It possibly indicated the company of some wild beast, slipping along their track. This stopped nearby.

"Why is our elephant acting so strangely?" Miss Preston questioned.

"Elephants have bad sight," Warren avoided a direct reply. "Perhaps he can't make out the way ahead."

He did not wish to alarm his companion unnecessarily; for, even if they were trailed by a savage beast, he knew it was unlikely an attack would be made on an elephant. For all that his hand went to the butt of the pistol he had slipped in his pocket, to scare off by the report any too pressing wild elephant during the drive.

The mahout had begun to curse all Danga's ancestors, when the long body of a panther leaped across the path a pace or two in front of the elephant. Danga started back with a shrill trumpet, and that which Warren did fear happened. The untrustworthy, craven disposition of the Meerga elephant gave way to sudden panic. He swung round violently and, heading for the opposite side from where the panther had disappeared, bolted into the jungle.

Warren shot out an arm round Miss Preston's shoulders, dragging her forcibly down beside his own crouching form.

"Lie low, for Heaven's sake!" he urged her. "The beast has got out of control! Hold on, and look out to dodge things ahead!"

HE kept to himself the information that clinging to the back of a bolting elephant is regarded as being in greater danger than meeting a tiger on foot. As likely as not a surprised tiger will bolt from a human being; but there is no escape from the back of a runaway elephant. All that can be done is what Warren implored Miss Preston,—to hang on with hands and feet as close

a mountain track. For a moment he seemed undecided which direction to take; but presently shot off down a steep incline, possibly animal instinct suggesting that it led back to camp. The path soon became little wider than a mere shelf in the side wall of rock. At the pace they were going Warren felt none too sure of the elephant's foothold. A sharp angle ahead drew nearer as a particularly dangerous object to negotiate.

They were descending toward it recklessly, when round the corner loomed the slowly climbing huge bulk of another elephant. On his back two men seemed to be nodding as if half asleep, while a third dozed in the place of the mahout. As there was no room for the two beasts to pass, and a collision looked inevitable, Warren shouted to warn the other party; but either they did not hear or were indifferent. Suddenly Danga put on a brake with all four feet, and came to a halt by bracing himself against the side wall. At the same time Warren recognized Old Steam Shovel in the oncoming elephant. He realized that in the meeting of Old Steam Shovel and the beast that had smitten him, in such a place, lay the greatest peril they had yet encountered. The risk of escaping from Danga's back had to be taken without a second thought.

"Jump!" he cried to Miss Preston. "Jump for your life!"

He grasped her firmly, and dropped her over Danga's near flank. Fortunately the beast stood motionless, with trunk extended, watching Old Steam Shovel's irresistible advance. In another instant Warren had swung himself down, and was helping Miss Preston up a few feet of loose shale to a ledge of comparative safety. They had barely gained it, when Old Steam Shovel came on in as near a run as the term may be applied to an elephant. Danga gave note to a shrill scream and endeavored to back away.

The three men woke to their danger and tried to halt Old Steam Shovel. As well might they have set their wills against the fury of a tornado. With trunk curled, and his massive head lowered, Old Steam Shovel rushed upon Danga. The two heads met with a thundering crash, while the tusks of both animals became interlocked. The three men fell off Old Steam Shovel's back, he with the goad tumbling into a bush that sprang from the edge of the track. Followed a spectacle the like of which both Warren and Miss Preston subsequently declared they hardly wished to see again.

Into his immense shoulders Old Steam Shovel put forth all his strength. He seemed to have a definite object in pushing the other back, one that Danga comprehended and strove to resist by sinking almost on his haunches. But in such a struggle the advantage of the Koomeriah's build over the weedy Meerga was soon apparent. Old Steam Shovel's colossal feet took firm hold of the rocky path, while Danga's extremities slid and wabbled. The tremendous muscles of the Koomeriah elephant filled out the loose skin of his flanks, as he put his great back into the effort of slowly, persistently, forcing Danga in a rear movement toward the edge of the track. Only a few inches remained between Danga and a drop of some hundred feet.

Meanwhile Warren and Miss Preston watched breathless, without voice to intervene, even if Old Steam Shovel could thus have been recalled from his vengeance. Presently he sank his head a bit lower, gripped Danga's relatively narrow chest with his tusks, and flung his whole weight into a supreme test. The edge of the track crumbled and sank beneath Danga's hind quarters, and he toppled over the brink. Warren saw him roll down twenty or thirty feet, to be brought up on an outstanding shelf, with all four legs beating the air. A trifle more momentum, or a bit worse luck in the spot he went over, and

Danga would have immediately ended his career as camp executioner by a sheer drop of nearly a fifth of a mile to the valley beneath.

Old Steam Shovel looked down upon his vanquished enemy and appeared satisfied. He lifted his head and stretched forth his trunk. From his mouth came a trumpet, which was caught up by the hills and echoed afar. It proclaimed to all the jungle folk that he, a Koomeriah, King of a Thousand Elephants, had wiped out his disgrace. For witness of it, did not the eagle soaring overhead behold how the Koomeriah had regained his caste?

WHEN it was all over, and Warren thought it safe to descend from his perch, it was to receive an entirely friendly greeting from Old Steam Shovel. At the sound of Warren's voice he offered his trunk to be caressed, and looked as if he expected a tribute of sugarcane. Meanwhile the three elephant merchants had remained stupefied, backed up against the side wall. Warren dealt shortly with them. By displaying his pistol, they were persuaded to lead a procession back to camp. As Miss Preston was naturally adverse to mounting another elephant that day, Old Steam Shovel took the next place in line, with Warren and his companion on foot bringing up the rear. Danga was left

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Old Steam Shovel Flung His Whole Weight Into a Supreme Test.

to the elephant's back as possible, and more or less cheerfully hope he will be stunned by hitting something head on bigger and harder than himself. Fortunately the jungle was broken and fairly low through which Danga forced a mad passage. In a little, too, he began to climb the sidehill of a nullah, and this reduced his pace. Also the gray light of dawn spread over the landscape, enabling Warren to see what they were likely to meet with in advance.

He noticed for the first time that their mahout had either been swept from the elephant's neck, or had risked being trampled on by slipping to earth. In this way Danga gained the summit of the nullah, and broke into

dropping softly to the ground, was ready for his first experiment in the gentle art of highway robbery.

CHAPTER IX. Melodrama in the Snow

THE justly celebrated moon that in summer months shed so much glamour on the romances of Baldpate Inn was nowhere in evidence as Magee crept along the ground close to the veranda. The snow sifted down upon him out of the blackness above; three feet ahead the world seemed to end.

"A corking night," he muttered humorously, "for my début in the holdup business!"

He swung up over the rail out on the veranda, and walked softly along it until he came to a window opening into the office. Cautiously he peered in. The vast, lonely room was lighted by a single candle. At the foot of the broad stair he could discern a great bulk, seated on the lowest step, which he correctly took to be the Mayor of Reuton. Pack of the desk, on which stood the candle, Max's head and shoulders were visible. He was working industriously in the immediate vicinity of the safe door. Occasionally he consulted the small traveling bag that stood on the desk. Many other professions had claimed Max before his advent into Reuton politics. Evidently he was putting into operation the training acquired in one of them. Bland was nowhere in sight.

Shivering with cold and excitement, Magee leaned against the side of Baldpate Inn and waited. Max worked eagerly, turning frequently to his bag as a physician might turn to his medicine case. No word was spoken in the office. Minutes passed. The bulk at the foot of the stairs surged restlessly. Max's operations were mostly hidden by the desk at which, in summer, timid old ladies inquired for their mail. Having time to think, Magee pictured the horror of those ladies could they come up to the desk at Baldpate now.

Suddenly Max ran out into the center of the office. Almost on the instant there was a white puff of smoke and a roar. The inn seemed to roll down the mountain after all those years of sticking tight. The Mayor looked apprehensively up the stair behind him. Max ran to the open safe door, and came back before the desk with a package in his hand. After examining it hastily, Cargan placed the loot in his pocket. The greedy eyes of Max followed it for a second; then he ran over and gathered up his tools. Now they were ready to depart. The Mayor lifted the candle from the desk. Its light fell on a big chair by the fire, and Magee saw in that chair the figure of Bland, bound and gagged.

Cargan and his companion paused, and appeared to address triumphant and jesting

comment in Bland's direction. Then they buttoned their coats and, holding aloft the candle, disappeared through the dining room door.

I MUST have that package!" Standing on the balcony of Baldpate Inn, her yellow hair white with snow, her eyes shining even in shadow, thus had the lady of this weird drama spoken to Magee. And gladly he had undertaken the quest. Now, he knew, the moment had come to act. Max he could easily dispose of, he felt; Cargan would require time and attention.

He hurried round to the front door of the inn, and, taking the big key from his pocket, unlocked it as a means of retreat where the men he was about to attack could not follow. Already he heard their muffled steps in the distance. Crossing the veranda, he dropped down into the snow by the side of the great stone steps that led to Baldpate Inn's chief entrance.

He heard Cargan and Max on the veranda just above his head. They were speaking of trains to Reuton. In great good humor, evidently, they started down the steps. Magee crouched, resolved that he would spring the moment they reached the ground. They were on the last step—now!

Suddenly from the other side of the steps a black figure rose, a fist shot out, and Max went spinning like a whirling dervish down the snowy path, to land in a heap five feet away. The next instant the Mayor of Reuton and the black figure were locked in terrific conflict. Magee, astounded by this turn of affairs, could only stand and stare through the dark.

For fifteen seconds, muttering, slipping, grappling, the two figures waltzed grotesquely about in the falling snow. Then the Mayor's feet slid from under him on the treacherous white carpet, and the two went down together. As Magee swooped down upon them he saw the hand of the stranger find the Mayor's pocket and draw from it the package that had been placed there in the office a few moments before.

Unfortunately for the demands of the drama in which he had become involved, Magee had never been an athlete at the university. But he was a young man of average strength and agility, and he had the advantage of landing most unexpectedly on his antagonist. Before that man realized what had happened, Magee had wrenches the package from his hand, thrown him back on the prostrate form of the highest official of Reuton, and fled up the steps. Quickly the stranger regained his feet and started in pursuit; but he arrived at the great front door of Baldpate Inn just in time to hear the lock click inside.

To be continued next Sunday

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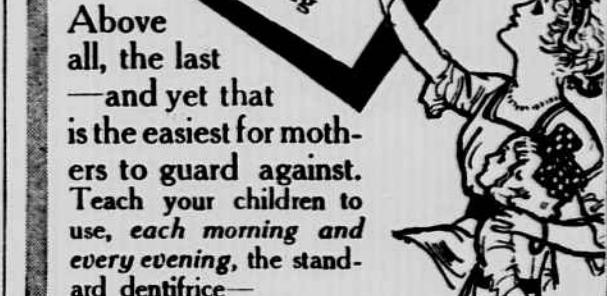
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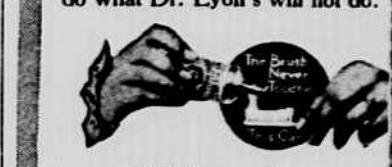
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KING OF A THOUSAND ELEPHANTS

Continued from page 6

to think over matters until a relief could be sent out for his rescue.

It was a long and dusty tramp, and the midday sun was scorching overhead before they reached camp, footsore and consumed with thirst. There they were surprised to find the drive party returning in straggling detachments. It transpired that a break had been discovered in the "surround," and the drive consequently postponed until the morrow. But of first interest was Old Steam Shovel's abduction. A young native Prince, who had joined the party at the "surround," returned with the Governor. He was eager to inspect the elephant. When the beast was brought before him he expressed unbounded admiration.

"A Koomeriah of the first caste!" he exclaimed. "A King's elephant! How did you manage to purchase him?" he questioned Warren.

Warren referred to the three merchants. They were sent for, and stood uneasily in the Prince's presence. He spoke to them in their own dialect, and finally turned to Warren.

"These fellows," he said, "are not reputable elephant merchants, but thieves and thorough rascals. They evidently chose the day of the drive to regain possession of the elephant, so that they might have at least twenty-four hours' start of any pursuit. I imagine they stole the elephant in the first place from some King or noble, their story about the ruined Raja being palpably false."

The Prince closely examined Old Steam Shovel again. He went over all his points with the care of an expert, noting the short, thick neck, bump between the eyes, soft skin, and so forth. Presently he drew back, pointing to small, cream-colored splashes on the ears and base of the trunk.

"I have identified him by those marks," he spoke with gratification. "He is the State elephant of the Maharaja of Indrapur.

He was either stolen or lost by breaking away about a year ago. Such an elephant is worth at least fifteen thousand dollars. I have no doubt the Maharaja will pay handsomely for his return."

A BOUT six months later Warren and his wife (formerly Miss Preston) were returning from an early morning ride in the vicinity of an ancient native city. As they came up to one of the gates, they drew aside and halted to permit a royal cortège to pass out. First came a bodyguard of lancers, then servants in resplendent costumes walking beside an elephant. The beast moved with slow and majestic pace, as if conscious of exalted dignity. On his back was a curtained howdah of ornately decorated silver. His tusks were plated with gold, his forehead fringed with jeweled ornaments. From his flanks hung a cloth of scarlet velvet, richly brocaded. His face was all painted up, according to custom; but Warren recognized him. He leaned over and grasped his wife's wrist to engage her attention.

"Do you see him?" he asked eagerly.

"That gorgeous mahout perched on the elephant's neck?" she questioned in return.

Mrs. Warren's interest had been centered on the silver howdah. For a moment the curtain was drawn aside by a delicate hand, revealing the glimpse of a beautiful woman's face. She was presumably a Queen on her way to some country place.

"No—no!" exclaimed Warren. "I mean the elephant. Hello, Gowry!" he cried. "Hello, Old Steam Shovel! Say, don't you remember me, old man?"

The elephant slowly swung his head round, waved his trunk, and—and Warren vouches for it that the royal beast solemnly winked. Be that as it may, the great Koomeriah went on his stately path, appropriately the bearer of a Hindu Queen.